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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have demonstrated the inability of naive observers (i.e., those who have no counseling training) to differentiate an empathic counselor from a content-only counselor on a variety of counselor rating scales. The present study extends these earlier studies by attempting to determine whether individuals who had been clients themselves would perceive differences between a videotape of an empathic counselor and one of a non-empathic counselors. College students (N=34) who had recently received at least three sessions of personal counseling served as subjects in the study. Subjects viewed one videotape of an empathic counselor and one of a non-empathic counselor, on a counterbalanced basis, and rated each on the short version of the Counselor Rating Form. The results indicated that former clients perceived content-only counseling as highly effective only when a base of empathic communication had been built. The empathic counselor was rated nearly equivalently whether presented first or second. These results emphasize the importance of supportive empathy and the need to teach counselors the skill of empathy. (References and statistical results are included.) (Author/ABL)

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The Empathic vs. the Non-empathic Counselor: Differences in Evaluations by Observers with Experience as Clients

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Running head: THE EMPATHIC VS. THE NON-EMPATHIC COUNSELOR

Abstract

A series of studies reported by Yager, Heilman, and Melchior (1984) demonstrated the inability of naive observers (i.e., those who have no counseling training) to differentiate an empathic counselor from a content-only counselor on a variety of counselor rating scales. The present study is an extension of these earlier studies by attempting to answer the following question: Will individuals who have been clients themselves perceive differences between a videotape of an empathic counselor and one of a non-empathic counselor? Thirty-four college students who had recently received at least three sessions of personal counseling served as subjects in the study. Subjects viewed two videotapes, on a counterbalanced basis, and rated each on the short version of the Counselor Rating Form. Results indicated that former clients perceive content-only counseling as highly effective only when a base of empathic communication has been built. The empathic counselor was rated nearly equivalently whether presented first or second. Implications for counseling and counselor education are addressed in the paper's discussion section.

The Empathic vs. the Non-empathic Counselor: Differences in Evaluations by Observers with Experience as Clients

The counseling relationship, although similar to other important relationships in some respects, is usually seen as unique in that it provides an atmosphere that intentionally fosters client personal growth and behavioral change. Individuals from widely different theoretical approaches to counseling subscribe to the idea that the process and progress of counseling depends, to some extent, upon certain relationship skills demonstrated by the counselor (e.g., Chambless & Goldstein, 1979; Egan, 1986; Ivey, 1983; Kohut & Wolf 1978; Luborsky, 1984). Moreover, counselor educators generally assume that empathy training is, at least, an initial step in developing the skills necessary for an effective counseling relationship (Egan, 1986). Since empathy is seen as important to counselor education, it seems logical that it should also be important enough that observer/clients can identify when it is present or absent. Additionally, these same observers might be expected to perceive a relationshp between empathy and counselor effectiveness.

A recent study by Yager, Heilman, and Melchior (1984) demonstrated (through a set of related investigations) that subjects who had no counseling training were unable to discriminate between a counselor who used empathy from one who did not. Counselor supervisors and counselor trainees who had received empathy training were able to distinguish between the two, and they rated the empathic counselor more highly.

Empathy is considered an important counseling skill, and it has been directly related to counseling effectiveness (e.g., Anthony & Drasgow, 1978; Carkhuff, 1969a, 1969b, 1972). How can it be that untrained observers are unable to identify its presence in a counseling situation?

One possible answer to this question is that the analogue research used by Yager, Heilman, and Melchior (1984) may be too far removed from the actual experience of the client. When an observer is asked to watch a client talking with a counselor, we cannot necessarily assume that the reactions will be the same as when the person directly talks to a counselor. In support of this idea, there has been research reported suggesting that an individual who interacts with a counselor will rate that person more highly than if they have observed the same counselor in an interaction with someone else (e.g., Dell & LaCrosse, 1978; Helms, 1976; McKitrick, 1981; Zlotlow & Allen, 1981). If the typical observer is, perhaps, too removed from the experience of the client on a videotape, it may be hypothesized that individuals who have been clients in counseling might have different perceptions of the videotapes of high and low counselor empathy.

The prevailing view of many people in our society is that feelings should generally be avoided in a conversation and that a direct approach to feelings is unnecessarily intrusive. In the counseling relationship, the opposite view is generally held: feelings provide important information about the client's behavior and should be discussed as directly as possible. An experienced client, however, should be better able to view a

videotaped counselor from a client's perspective. People who had been clients themselves might be more able to understand and identify with the concerns discussed by the videotaped client. Consequently, it was expected that experienced clients would perceive the differences favoring high over low empathy counselors.

The objective of this study was to test whether former clients from a college counseling center would perceive differences between a counselor who responded empathically to a videotaped client and the same counselor who made only content responses to the client. In essence, the study is a face validity investigation of the skill of empathy. If former clients are unable to perceive differences in effectiveness between an empathic and a non-empathic counselor, the validity of empathy training becomes questionable. Since empathy skill training is generally part of a master's degree in counseling, the results of this investigation are highly relevant to counselor educators.

Methods

Subjects

Thirty-four students (24 females, 10 males) who had been clients (for at least three sessions) at the Kutztown University Counseling Center volunteered to participate in the study. They had been recruited on a personal contact basis from among clients of counselors at the university. (In no case was a client or former client of the male counselor on the videotape involved in the study.) The average age of study participants was 21.85

years. All levels of college study were represented: 32.4% freshmen, 17.6% sophomores, 20.6% juniors, 20.6% seniors and 8.8% graduate students. One participant was Black.

Although it is unlikely that the sample was characteristic of all clients who seek counseling, each person had, at minimum, experienced counseling from the perspective of a client. Additionally, each of the counselors whose clients participated in the study indicated that the use of empathy and related skills were important parts of their attempts to establish an effective counseling relationship with their clients.

Instrumentation

Participants were asked to rate the videotaped counselor on two separate scales: the shortened version of the Counselor Rating Form (CRF-S: Corrigan & Schmidt, 1983) and the Overall Counselor Effectiveness Rating (Yager, Heilman, & Melchior, 1984).

The Counselor Response Form - Short version consists of twelve 7 point bipolar items from the instrument originally developed by Barak and LaCrosse (1975; LaCrosse & Barak, 1976). The CRF-S yielded three ratings for each of the two videotapes: expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Four items correspond to each dimension, with scores from 4 to 28 on each scale. Higher scores indicate perceptions of greater expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Corrigan and Schmidt (1983) report inter-item reliabilities ranging from .82 to .94 for the three scales in four separate rating situations.

The final measure was designed as part of a series of

investigations reported in Yager, Heilman and Melchior's (1984) paper. The Overall Counselor Effectiveness Rating was a used to measure the observer's overall rating of the counselor. The scale consists of three seven-point Likert-type items. Yager (1985) reported an internal consistency reliability of .86 for this measure.

Procedures

To maximize the comparison desired with the Yager, Heilman, and Melchior (1984) studies, the identical videotapes were used. These were two 15-minute counseling segments of the same female client (role-played) as she discussed her worries about her relationship with her boyfriend. In both videotapes, the male counselor was the same individual. He did not appear on camera in order to avoid affecting participants' ratings through evaluation of non-verbal cues. In one videotape, each counselor response was rated at or above an interchangeable level on Carkhuff's empathy scale. During the second videotape, no empathy was expressed at all -- each counselor statement was a content reflection or a question concerning content. Both videotapes had been designed to appear as serious attempts at counseling. Thus, although there were no acknowledgments of client feelings on the content tape, there was absolutely no sarcasm or cynicism present:

> the counselor consistently asked questions and sought further information in a manner designed to avoid any direct or indirect putdowns of the client. It was clear that this nonempathic counselor was paying attention and listening closely to the client despite his total lack of measured

Carkhuff empathy. (Yager, Heilman, & Melchior, 1984, p. 5)

The order of viewing of the two videotapes was counterbalanced to control for likely ordering effects. Yager, Heilman, and Melchior's studies (1984) had consistently found that the second counselor observed (whether empathic or not) was rated more positively than the first. Participants observed both videotapes, and, immediately after viewing each, they completed the counselor rating instruments. They were instructed to put themselves into the position of the client as best they could and to respond as they believed that the client would have responded.

Design

The analysis of the data involved an analysis of variance with repeated measures. The between subjects factor in the design was the effect for difference in the ordering of the two videotapes. The within subjects design included two factors: (a) the high empathy counselor vs. content counselor dimension, and (b) the repeated measures variable consisting of three scales of the CRF-S and the Overall Counselor Effectiveness Rating.

Results

The results of the analysis of variance with repeated measures are reported in Table 1. There was a significant difference between the subjects' ratings of the first videotape and of the second videotape [F (1, 32) = 6.14, p<.02]. The mean ratings (across all scales) were higher for the second videotape observed than for the first. Table 2 contains the means for each dependent measure in each ordinal position.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

There were three additional significant results highlighted in Table 1: (a) the interaction between counselor empathy level and the order of presentation of the videotapes [F (1,32) = 18.85, $p < .001$], (b) the repeated measures effect [F (3,96) = 61.59, $p < .001$], and (c) the three way interaction between repeated measures, counselor empathy level, and the order of presentation of the videotapes [F (3,96) = 2.34, $p < .05$]. The repeated measures effect and the significant interaction with repeated measures may both be artifacts of differing metrics employed in the four scales used in the investigation. In other words, the three CRF-S scales are composed of four items while the Overall Counselor Effectiveness Rating has only three items. Thus, statistical differences between these four scales are to be expected because they are measured differently. Given the differences between metrics, the repeated measures variable and its interactions will not be discussed further.

However, the significant interaction between ordering of videotapes and counselor empathy relates directly to the major focus of the investigation. For that reason, the interaction curve representing the mean scores across all scales have been presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Additionally, Table 3 contains a multivariate analysis of variance for the effect of order on each of the eight separate

ratings (two sets of 4 ratings each: one for the empathic counselor and one for the content counselor). Table 3 provides evidence that the empathic counselor was not rated significantly differently on any measure whether viewed first or second. However, the content counselor was rated significantly more positively on each counselor rating measure when viewed second in order.

Discussion

One caution concerning the discussion of the results of this investigation is that the raters were reacting to a videotape and not to a live interaction with the counselor. Recruiting students who had recently been clients may allow a closer understanding of the videotaped client's perspective, but one can safely generalize the results of the study only to observers of videotapes. Might the actual client in interaction with an empathic or nonempathic counselor have reacted differently? Very possibly, yes! This was a analog study somewhat removed from the true interactive nature of the counseling process.

Despite the inclusion of raters who had experience as clients, there were no dramatic preferences for the empathic counselor over the nonempathic counselor. The results of this study are, perhaps, most clearly summarized through examination of Figure 1. Although the empathic counselor was perceived as nearly equally effective if observed either first or second in order, the content counselor was rated both highest and lowest, depending upon whether the videotape was viewed first or second.

The content counselor, when observed after having seen the empathic counselor, was rated the most highly across all rating measures. The content counselor, when viewed first, fell below the ratings of the empathic counselor ordered either first or second. In fact, post hoc analyses indicated that the only two mean performance ratings that differed significantly from the others were the ratings between content counselor when rated first or second. There was no significant difference between ratings of the first and second ordering of the empathic counselor. Additionally, when viewed first, the content counselor, although rated lower than the empathy counselor, was not rated significantly lower.

A possible explanation for these data lies in the purpose of the skill of empathy. Egan (1986), for example, argues that empathy helps to establish the initial groundwork for an effective counseling relationship by establishing trust through an effort to understand both the feelings and content of the client's concern. The two videotapes in this study, although initially designed to be viewed as entirely separate sessions, might well be better understood as one more extensive session divided into two parts. The observers, not unexpectedly, were unable to view whatever videotape had been ordered second as a totally separate segment. The counselor's performance and the client's reactions to that counselor on the first tape will have impact upon the ratings of the counselor on the second tape.

From this perspective, the data generated may be seen as supportive of the postive impact that even as few as fifteen minutes of empathy can have at the start of a 30 minute session

with a counselor. The content questions asked by the nonempathic counselor in the context of fifteen minutes of previous empathy were very highly rated. Without the prior base of empathic communication, these same statements were perceived as significantly less effective.

Thus, it appears that experienced clients will rate a closely-attending content counselor highly when it has already been established that the counselor understands the client's concerns. The counselor effectiveness ratings are very high for the counselor who has moved on from empathy to employ direct and specific content questions. Would two successive empathy segments with the same client yield ratings for the second videotape equal to those of the content tape (when ordered second)? Would two content segments be rated progressively more poorly? These are two questions that may well provide a stimulus for future research in this area.

For counselor educators, continued attempts to teach the skill of empathy seem appropriate. The present study's results appear to indicate that high levels of empathy may create a more positive counseling environment that, in turn, is more productive for other interventions, including content-focused approaches. Thus, our counseling trainees may well need the foundation of empathy training as part of their preparation program.

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Table 1

Repeated Measures ANOVA -- Observers with Previous Experience as Clients in Actual Counseling Sessions rating both an Empathic Counselor Videotape and a Non-empathic (Content) Counselor Videotape[a]

Source of Variance	d.f.	MS	F	p<
Design Over Subjects				
Order of presentation of Videotapes (O)	1	4224.74	6.14	.02[b]
Error -- Subjects Within Order (S:O)	32	688.38		
Design Over Measures				
Counselor Empathy (E)	1	122.36	1.15	.29
E x O Interaction	1	2011.24	18.85	.001[b]
Error -- E x S:O	32	106.71		
Repeated Measures (R)	3	635.50	61.59	.001[b]
R x O Interaction	6	15.69	1.52	.31
Error -- R x S:O	96	10.35		
R x E Interaction	6	1.59	1.31	.54
R x E x O Interaction	6	2.83	2.34	.05[b]
Error -- RxExS:O	96	1.21		

[a] Four Counselor Rating Scales were employed as dependent measures: Counselor Effectiveness; Counselor Rating Form Expertness, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness

[b] Probabilities based on an exact test of repeated measures effects in a multivariate repeated measures analysis. For this reason, the exact probabilities may not match the probabilities apparently indicated by a straight repeated measures analysis.

Table 2

Means as a Function of Counselor Empathy Level and Videotape Order

	Empathy			
	High		Low	
Measure	Ordered First	Ordered Second	Ordered First	Ordered Second
Counselor Effectiveness	11.47	13.06	10.76	16.18
Counselor Rating Form - Expertness	16.94	18.29	13.88	22.06
Counselor Rating Form - Trustworthiness	17.88	18.41	16.24	21.88
Counselor Rating Form - Attractiveness	14.70	15.47	12.76	20.06
Average Scores across all scales	15.24	16.31	13.41	20.04

Table 3

Multivariate and Univariate Analysis of Variance for Differences in Counselor Effectiveness Ratings when Videotapes are Shown First or Second

Multivariate Analysis of Variance

$F(8,25) = 4.2699$, $p < .0025$

Univariate Analyses of Variance

Variable	Hypothesis Mean Square	Mean Square Error	Univariate F	p <
Ratings of High Empathy Counselor				
Overall Effectiveness	21.44	23.39	.92	.34
Expertness	15.56	17.83	.87	.36
Trustworthiness	2.38	13.25	.18	.67
Attractiveness	4.97	33.68	.15	.70
Ratings of Content Only Counselor				
Overall Effectiveness	248.94	13.98	17.80	.001
Expertness	568.26	23.65	24.03	.001
Trustworthiness	271.06	14.71	18.42	.001
Attractiveness	452.24	33.75	13.40	.001

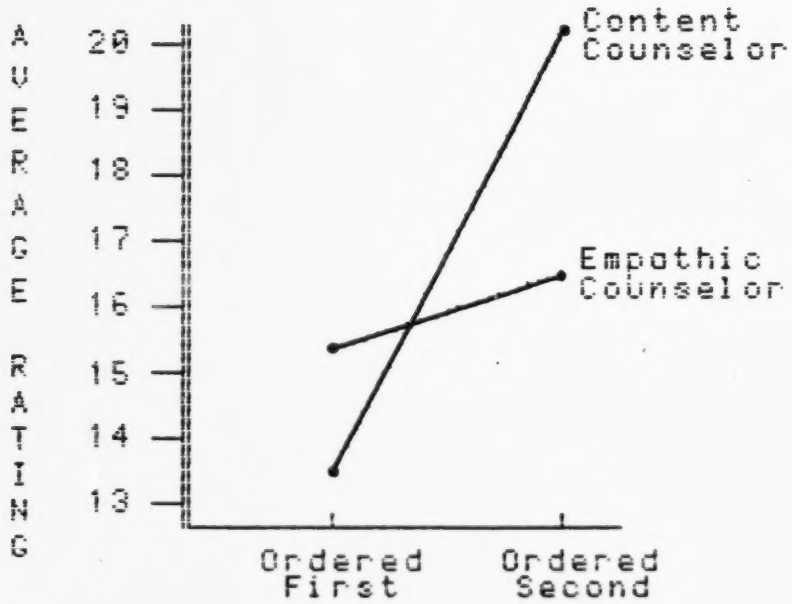

Figure 1. **The Interaction Curves for the Empathy Level by Order of Presentation Interaction**

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